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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 000334

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DEPT FOR NEA/ARP ANDREW MACDONALD  
EMBASSY RIYADH FOR LISA CARLE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PTER](#) [ECON](#) [YM](#)  
SUBJECT: YEMENI MILITARY COMMANDER DESCRIBES AL-QAEDA  
PRESENCE IN MARIB, CT NEEDS

REF: A. RIYADH 326  
[1](#)B. SANAA 83

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen A. Seche, for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (S) During a February 18 meeting with Embassy officers, MG Mohammed al-Maqdashi, Regional Commander of the Yemeni Armed Forces Middle District, described al-Qaeda's (AQ) presence in Marib as a diffuse, well-trained force of mostly Saudi recruits. Despite ample funding from sources in neighboring countries, especially Saudi Arabia, AQ's numbers in Marib remain small, according to Maqdashi. He claimed that local tribes increased their cooperation on CT matters with the ROYG following President Saleh's February 3 visit to the region. The command's stated CT needs include armored vehicles, parachutes, grenades, night-vision goggles, flak jackets, and sniper training. End Summary.

AQ IN MARIB: "NOT AS BIG AS YOU THINK"  
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[1](#)2. (S) MG Maqdashi told Emboffs on February 18 that countering the AQ threat is the main mission of his command, which covers the Marib, Jawf, and Shebwa governorates and includes one battalion of Yemeni Special Operations Forces (YSOF). Maqdashi described AQ's presence in central Yemen as a nimble, diffuse, but relatively small force, under pressure from the ROYG and local tribes. "AQ is not as big as you think or as the press reports," Maqdashi said, declining to estimate the precise number of fighters in the region. Maqdashi stressed the difficulty of targeting operatives who rarely congregate in one place for long and can "smell when someone is coming." AQ's ranks in Yemen are mostly Saudi and its funding and equipment come from Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries, claimed Maqdashi.

[1](#)3. (S) Maqdashi said that AQ forces in Yemen reportedly had "advanced," Saudi-procured communications equipment (NFI), Belgian FN and Russian magazine-loaded sniper rifles, and Somali-origin SAM launchers left over from the 1994 civil war, although he had not seen any of these items first-hand. Marib offers AQ many benefits, according to Maqdashi: an absence of vehicle registration, sparsely-populated desert terrain, a ready supply of unregistered small arms, and largely ungarded borders with Saudi Arabia and Oman. (Note:

Freedom from registering arms and vehicles is common throughout Yemen. End Note.) Despite this seemingly ideal operating environment, Maqdashi doubted that AQ maintains fixed operating bases in Marib, based on his command's inability to locate the rumored sites.

#### LOCAL TRIBES UNDER PRESSURE FROM ROYG

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14. (S) President Saleh's recent warning to tribal leaders regarding AQ's presence in their regions put pressure on the tribes to cooperate with the ROYG on CT matters, Maqdashi said. (Note: Saleh told Marib tribesmen during a February 3 visit to Marib that they should voluntarily hand over AQ operatives to the ROYG otherwise the military would go after AQ without the tribes' permission, according to a press report. End Note.) Maqdashi said that the military's relations with the local tribes are "delicate" and that even a single "incident" could ruin relations between the two. He said that some tribes, chastened by Saleh's message, were providing useful if not always actionable CT-related information to his command. An "unprecedented" increase in military checkpoints, land patrols, and air surveillance in Marib had put both AQ and local tribes on the defensive, Maqdashi said. One officer who had spent the past 16 years on the base told the OMC chief that the Middle District Command's dealings with the tribes had evolved from encounters defined by brute force to cautious cooperation based on shared interests. Maqdashi attributed the February 17 surrender of AQ leader Mohammed Oteik Oweid al-Aufi al-Harbi (aka Muhammed al-Oufi) (REF A) to the President's

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message and to the military's increased profile outside the base.

15. (C) Maqdashi said that Marib's worsening unemployment, partially caused by declining oil production (REF B), played into AQ's hands by making tribal leaders more susceptible to entreaties by AQ operatives flush with cash; it also made youth recruitment easier in the absence of employment alternatives. Maqdashi pleaded for additional USG development projects in Marib and stressed that security and development went hand-in-hand. Econoff pledged to relay this request to USAID and described the myriad U.S.-funded projects already underway in Marib, including a USAID-funded vocational institute in Marib City and numerous USDA-funded primary and secondary schools.

#### CT NEEDS IN MARIB

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16. (S/NF) Maqdashi said that the YSOF battalion under his command needs sniper training, parachutes, flak jackets, night-vision goggles, hand grenades, and armored vehicles. The military's Middle District includes 14 battalions of regular soldiers deployed across three governorates -- Marib, Shabwah, and Jawf -- and the one YSOF battalion. The YSOF battalion consists of 670 soldiers authorized, of which 450 are present at the base and approximately 240 are in training, including a paratrooper unit. (Note: More detailed information on the base will be reported separately through DAO channels. End Note.) Maqdashi and Ministry of Interior-appointed Governorate Security Director, BG Mohammad al-Ghadra, complained to the OMC chief that previous Embassy visits to Marib had yielded promises of ambulances and clinics but no follow up. The OMC chief detailed the extent of FMF-funded items given to YSOF in the past six months and warned that future terrorist attacks against the Embassy could impede official travel to Marib, making USG military assistance coordination more difficult.

#### BIO NOTE

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17. (C) MG Mohammed Maqdashi, one of Yemen's five regional

military commanders, became Middle District Commander in August 2008 and seemed engaged and energetic as he led Emboffs on a lengthy tour of the Marib paratrooper training site, the base's intelligence communications center, and YSOF training facilities.

COMMENT

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18. (S) Post agrees with Maqdashi's description of al-Qaeda in Marib as a numerically weak but potent force. Maqdashi's characterization of AQ in Yemen as a Saudi rather than a homegrown threat is typical of ROYG interlocutors who want to shift the focus away from Yemen's own failings and blame porous borders and foreign fighters instead. His optimistic assessment of YSOF's CT record and the pressure on the tribes resulting from Saleh's recent Marib visit is likely overblown and may have been intended for the ears of the Yemeni military intelligence official who sat in on all meetings.

19. (S) Comment continued. The commander's emphasis on the need for job creation and educational opportunities, however, was a refreshing perspective on security in Marib and a frank admission that military pressure on AQ and political pressure on the tribes are only part of the solution. Maqdashi and his senior officers have high expectations for future USG CT assistance and were correspondingly careful to balance their description of progress thus far with the challenge of countering AQ with the military's current resources. Despite their frustrations with the results of previous Embassy visits, the Marib command was clearly anxious to make a good impression, meeting with Emboffs for over four hours and not hesitating to provide specific information on the base's current technical capabilities. End Comment.

SECHE